While contemporary stereotypes of Parisians might suggest that their habits of “leisure culture” and their relationships with urban, suburban, and rural spaces have remained constant for hundreds of years, the period of industrialization and urbanization at the end of the nineteenth century was also a turning point in the way city-dwellers conceived of, and participated in, the suburbs around their city. In this essay, Emma Fallone ’16 analyzes Impressionist art from the period in order to discover how artists reflected the dramatic changes that swept through Parisian and French society. Through paintings, these artists offer a view of how Parisians themselves understood their lives, their city, and importantly, their leisure.

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Written for “The Emergence of Modern Paris”
Professor John Merriman
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The year was 1868, and radical revolutionary leader Raoul Rigault was fleeing the police yet again. His incendiary words against the Second Empire had caught the attention of police spies, likely the very same men who were now mere steps behind in attempting to bring him to justice. Thinking quickly, Rigault dashed into the Gare de Lyon and jumped aboard the first train that he saw, which happened to be traveling out into the countryside. He left the train when it reached a forested region called Moret-sur-Loing, near the suburb of Fontainebleau. After wandering aimlessly for two days in this foreign landscape, having lost not only the Parisian police but himself as well, Rigault happened upon a lone man standing at an easel in the middle of the fields. As the painter would recall decades later, a young man “…of an appearance not terribly engaging appeared. His clothes were torn and covered in mud, his eyes wild and his movements jerky.” Initially assuming Rigault to be a madman, the painter prepared to defend himself. Yet after the fugitive explained his situation and pleaded for a place to hide, the sympathetic painter simply offered him a smock and box of paintbrushes. This was all that Rigault would need to blend in, he explained – the only Parisians who ever came out to the suburbs were Impressionist painters; attired as such, the peasants wouldn’t give Rigault a second thought. The grateful anarchist obeyed and successfully returned to Paris as a free man. He would later become a key player in the creation of the Paris Commune. As for the painter? He was none other than Auguste Renoir.

Aside from the tantalizing, coincidental intersection of the lives of these two historic figures, what can this story reveal about Parisian life at this particular point in time? The unusual circumstances that made an event such as this possible are highly reflective of late nineteenth-century urban Paris and its relationship with the suburbs. At this time, the city was in the midst of a major transformation, which saw traditional ways of life being pushed aside by powerful forces of modernization. In the previous era, the suburbs of Paris had been to a large degree isolated from the urban city center; viewed as backwards and dangerous, they were rarely visited by city-dwellers. The few who ventured outside the city walls in these early days were painters, especially early Impressionists like Renoir. But the drastic changes in Paris’s urban landscape wrought by Baron Georges-Eugene Haussmann, coupled with the forces of industrialization and the growth of railroads, began to change not only the geography of the city, but the entire culture of urban society itself. The resulting development of a new “leisure culture” fundamentally altered the relationship between Paris and its suburbs, as these spaces were conceptualized and utilized in entirely novel ways by a new generation of Parisians. Thus, while Renoir’s costume advice may have reflected an older culture, the mere fact of Rigault’s ability to so easily flee to Fontainebleau signifies a new porousness of Parisian city limits. It was Impressionists like Renoir who stood witness to this change, their paintings recording both the dramatic restructuring of urban and suburban landscapes and the cultural ideal of a new leisure class that developed as a result.

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Before the reign of Emperor Napoleon III and his prefect Baron Haussmann, the city of Paris was a far cry from the shining, expansive cosmopolitan city that enchants the imaginations of many today. Until the mid-1800s, Paris could in many ways still be called a “medieval” city. The
layout of the urban center was chaotic and claustrophobic, a dense, labyrinthine tangle of narrow, winding streets and alleys. The crowding and disorder of Paris made traveling throughout the city a profoundly unpleasant experience, as French novelist Honoré de Balzac bemoaned in 1834, writing of his city: “For people accustomed to the splendors of life, is there anything more ignoble than the mud, the cries, the bad odor, the narrowness of populous streets?” Indeed, in the days of pre-Haussmann Paris, the streets were almost wholly the domain of the “sans-culottes.” The noise and refuse of everyday, lower-class life spilled out onto the streets, clogging the narrow lanes and creating an unhealthy, dark, and potentially dangerous environment.

Thus, especially for the bourgeoisie, passage through public space was not a pleasurable activity but rather just an unfortunate necessity of urban life. The upper classes traversed the streets simply to go from one place to another, spending only as much time in this realm as was absolutely necessary. The bourgeois social sphere was thus largely confined to indoor settings; the only way that it could break free from this restriction would be if the very urban landscape of the city itself was dramatically altered. As historian David Jordan astutely notes, “The hurly-burly as well as the manners and habits of those that thronged the streets made them more than a distasteful inconvenience for the bourgeoisie….All these had to be dislodged, banished from the center of Paris for boulevard life to become widespread and bourgeois. The streets had to be cleaned culturally as well as physically.” Awareness of and frustration with the many varied disadvantages that the tangled layout of Paris caused – especially to the upper classes – had been on the rise for decades. As Voltaire implored in a pamphlet published in 1749, “May God find some man zealous enough to undertake such projects, possessed of a soul firm enough to complete his undertakings, a mind enlightened enough to plan them, and may he have sufficient social stature to make them succeed.” By the crowning of Emperor Napoleon III in 1852, the need to solve the Parisian urban problem could no longer be ignored. And Baron Haussmann was just the man that Voltaire – and many others – had been waiting for.

An analysis of the influence of Baron Haussmann on the urban landscape of Paris could fill an entire book – and indeed, many comprehensive works have been published on the subject. To summarize, from the moment of his appointment as Prefect of the Seine in 1853, Haussmann spearheaded dozens of major urban renovation projects. His goal: “aérer, unifier, et embellir” – to create fresh air and open space, to unify the city as an organized whole, and to make it a capital with beauty to rival any other major European city. Under his orders, wide, open streets were cut throughout the city along major axes of movement, paralleling the Seine and connecting main landmarks. These “Grands Boulevards,” the most famous of which include the rue de Rivoli, rue Saint-Antoine, Boulevard Strasbourg, and Boulevard Sebastopol, were bulldozed straight through old neighborhoods, suddenly and drastically remaking Paris in a new image.

By creating a major new network of streets throughout the city, forcibly smashing a new grid straight through the old network of streets and buildings, Haussmann altered not only the way in which the Parisians traversed their city but also their entire relationship with the urban landscape.
ART AS A WINDOW INTO THE PAST

in which they lived. The change was even reflected in the Parisian vernacular— as Jordan observes, “The prefect had cut the city into sections and the very slashes – the boulevards – re-defined urban life, fixed its contours, and indelibly marked Paris. The word boulevardier entered the language as a noun in 1866 and as an adjective in 1877, designating one who frequented the Grands Boulevards for pleasure, not transportation. Haussmann did not have chiefly in mind the creation of la vie boulevardière, but it became his most memorable cultural achievement.” This new conception of the landscape of the city center as not merely a zone for transportation but also a space for public leisure was amplified further by the creation or renovation of many new squares, such as place du Chateau-d’Eau (the modern Place de la Republique) and Place de l’Europe; and public parks and gardens, such as those of the Champs-Élysées and Parc Monceau. Scholar Pamela Todd succinctly summarizes the effect of these changes on the image of Paris in the days of Haussmannization, as the city “was rapidly becoming the capital of pleasure. A beguiling city through which to stroll… Their capital had become a city of tourism, entertainment, shopping and light. The vast circulatory system of the boulevards kept everything moving…No other city could boast such brilliance, opulence, and display. And – best of all – the splendor of the modern city was available to everyone who walked in these spaces.”

The transformation of Paris, with its new wide, airy boulevards and parks, brought with it a change in the social culture and behavior of Parisians themselves. Now that many of the main streets were no longer cramped and clogged with refuse, the outdoor urban landscape became not just something to endure, but rather something which could be enjoyed simply for its own sake. More than that, it became a site for social interaction, amongst all levels of Parisian society. Suddenly, it was possible – and indeed, highly pleasurable – to spend all day wandering throughout the expansive, beautiful streets, observing the swirl of the highly social milieu and basking in the thrill of seeing and being seen. If the residents of Paris were social actors, then Haussmann’s boulevards were their stage – and the resulting performances were brilliant indeed.

The excitement of this heady, nascent leisure culture proved to be a powerful inspiration to a new generation of artists. Some painters interpreted it as a system promoting frivolity and superficiality: As Renoir grumbled to his son, who recorded the tirade in his memoir, “…ready-made clothes [are] now the fashion and people [begin] to look like tailors’ dummies. You see, the trouble with ready-made clothing is that everybody can afford to look well-dressed, as well-dressed as a commercial traveler. You have the workman disguised as a gentleman for the modest price of twenty-five francs fifty. When I was a youngster, workmen were proud of their profession. Carpenters wore baggy corduroy trousers and a blue or red flannel sash round their waist, even on Sunday; house painters wore a beret and flowing tie. Now they’ve replaced pride in their profession by this idiotic vanity of trying to look like the bourgeoisie. In consequence, the streets of Paris seem to be filled with supers out of a play by the younger Dumas.” Others embraced the change. Yet whether enthusiastic or dismayed, Impressionists’ paintings were unavoidably infused with the “new Paris” and its accompanying cultural shifts – they painted the city that, for better or for worse, they now
lived in and knew.

One member of this new generation of Parisian artists was Gustave Caillebotte. Caillebotte was unique among Impressionists in that he actually could be considered a member of the rising wealthy leisure class that was created by Haussmann's urban planning. The untimely death of his father, a successful textile merchant, left Caillebotte with a substantial inheritance at the relatively young age of 26. This fortune allowed the young artist to enjoy a relatively upper-class lifestyle and funded his full-time enrollment at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1873. After becoming an established painter and making strong connections with other prominent figures such as Edgar Degas, Caillebotte became a leading member of the Impressionist movement, often using his substantial resources to finance exhibitions and support his contemporaries. His rare view into the intimate details of the lives of his subjects and his personal experience of this new lifestyle granted Caillebotte an unusual perspective and enabled him to represent the reality of life within the “new Paris” in a way that most other Impressionists simply could not.

One painting that captures Caillebotte’s intimate understanding of the rising Parisian leisure class is “The Young Man at the Window,” which depicts a well-dressed man standing at an open window in a lavishly furnished Parisian apartment. His back is turned, granting the viewer hardly a hint as to his identity – yet we can follow his gaze through the window to take in the full panorama of city life dominated by the sunny, broad, clean boulevards of Haussmann’s design. As scholar Anthony Sutcliffe argues, “Caillebotte’s emphasis on Haussmann’s Paris takes on a personal significance. The walls, curtains and furniture of Caillebotte’s rooms, and the endless facades of the streets, alike enclose their bored, wealthy prisoners….Caillebotte portrayed an almost aimless life in which the rich spent most of their time in minor pursuits in their homes, leaving occasionally for a stroll…. “

Overall, works such as “The Young Man at the Window” powerfully convey a “…theme of boredom sometimes complemented by a sense of imprisonment,” as the wealthy subjects almost seem to fade away, becoming one with the city whose new layout so strongly influenced their daily lives.

This idea of melding figure and ground as a metaphor for wealthy urban life in Haussmann’s Paris was expressed even more explicitly in the defense of the 1876 Impressionist exhibition written by prominent naturalist writer Edmond Duranty. Entitled “La Nouvelle Peinture,” the piece called for artists to turn fully away from simple subject-based works and instead focus on portraying contemporary city life, to “…no longer separate the figure from the background… In real life, the figure never appears against neutral, empty, or vague backgrounds….The frame of the window, depending on whether we are near or far, seated or standing, cuts off the outside scene in most unexpected ways…” These new urban ideas even made it into contemporary literature, as Henry James wrote while on vacation in Paris in 1876 that he saw his hotel window as a frame through which he could see the “canvas” of the city.

Yet Caillebotte also went further, stepping outside of the confines of upper-class Parisian apartments to depict the new urban life upon the recently paved boulevards themselves. As Herbert
comments on these works, “The modernity of these paintings lies, in part, in their exploitation of Haussmannian planning, a seeming acceptance of the Second Empire’s most controversial feature: its ruthless urban geometry.”16 Caillebotte’s “Paris Street; Rainy Day”17 is set at one of the locations best situated to appreciate the work of Baron Haussmann: the intersection of five major boulevards that were a part of Haussmann’s new plan for the city. Coincidentally – or, in fact, perhaps not so – Caillebotte grew up only five blocks away from that very spot, on the rue de Miromesnil.18 From young adulthood, he lived within this drastically altered version of Paris experiencing firsthand the new, pleasant elements of boulevard life – the enjoyment of the stroll through the city, the streets as a setting for social interaction – that his works represent. Yet in addition to his awareness of the glamour of the rising leisure culture enabled by Haussmannization, Caillebotte was also sharply cognizant of the costs of such a societal shift. Despite the number of people present in the scene, all of whom are now able to enjoy the experience of promenading on the new, wide streets, a sense of isolation strongly permeates “Paris Street, Rainy Day.” Each of the individuals and couples are both physically ensconced beneath their own umbrellas and also mentally separated, avoiding interaction or even eye contact with the other city-dwellers or the viewer. This sense of loneliness – a reaction to overwhelming new opportunities for social interaction that was not eager participation but rather a fearful retreat inwards – accurately captures social phenomena in nineteenth-century Paris. The muted gray and tan tones of the painting and the implication of rain only further add to the gloom. Caillebotte, in sum, seems to point to a depression among modern Parisians, brought on by the massive changes wrought by Haussmann, and the destruction of their familiar neighborhoods. Caillebotte’s work reflects many aspects of the Haussmanization of Paris, including not only the issues within the growing boulevardier class but also the tension between the new societal focus on leisure and the industrialization which sustained it. This dynamic is seen most prominently in his work, “Le Pont de l’Europe,”19 as the arrangement of elements within the painting serves to emphasize a class divide. On the far left side of the scene stretches a grand boulevard, reaching far into the distance with a hint of cityscape beyond. In the center-left region walk two Parisians. Their expensive dress and position in the center of the boulevard’s sidewalk clearly denote them as members of the upper class, flâneurs out to engage in the new realm of socialization and leisure created by the wide avenue upon which they stroll. In contrast, the far right side of the painting is dominated by a massive steel railway bridge, with an industrial landscape visible behind. In the center-right, leaning on the bridge railing, is an industrial worker of some sort, dressed in work clothes and accompanied by an ungroomed dog. Though he might be contemplative, it seems more likely that he is merely taking a rest from his labors. The irony is palpable – the individuals on both sides are engaging in leisure, but it is of course the hard work of the latter, in the rapidly growing realm of industry, that allows for the repose-centered lifestyle of the well-dressed pair. Herbert concludes that the dichotomy caused by these railroad tracks is central to the overarching meaning of the work, as “The key to Caillebotte’s painting is the cyclopean metalwork, embodiment of industrial power, aggressive symbol of the transformation of Paris. Caillebotte’s frank use of its
unembellished geometry brings this raw power out into the open. Its stark lines are deliberately ugly…They stand for Haussmann’s controlling directives which slashed through this part of Paris to create a new quarter around the expanded rail station….He does not praise the new Paris. He strips away all that is natural and delicate…and in doing so he exposes the harsh power, full of tensions, which underlay industrial Paris and its new society.”

Industrialization and the rise of the railroads that occurred concurrently with – or even because of – Haussmannization had consequences not only for Parisians’ relationship with their home city, but also for their relationship with its suburbs. To the residents of the “old,” pre-Haussmann Paris, the villages outside of the city were an almost alien land, dangerous and undesirable. In his analysis of the journeys taken by Parisians in and out of Paris during the late eighteenth century, Richard Cobb notes that the distance between these two locales was not only a physical one, but also – more importantly – a mental one. He argues, “A two-way traffic that is much more difficult to analyse is a mental one, based on a mixture of experience, observation, memory, fear, prejudice, and myth…the conditioning of mentalities that face in opposite directions: inwards towards the capital, and outwards, towards le pourtoir de Paris, the dark, alarming tribal lands…” This is not to say that the city-dwellers were not aware of the villages – they were, at least in theory. The city did rely on the goods brought in from the countryside, most obviously food and raw materials – but even then, the only points of contact between Parisians and villagers were often the specific markets to which villagers would travel to sell their wares, notably at Les Halles, a number of ports along the Seine, or smaller markets at the points of entry to the city. Indeed, “attitudes displayed towards these places [by Parisians] revealed a mixture of arrogance, contempt, mistrust, and fear….the Parisian view [was] that most of the inhabitants of the rural periphery were really nothing better than naked savages and cannibals, and that these people were innately nasty, brutal, and bloody.”

The woodlands loomed especially large in Parisian imagination, especially the expanse of the Bois du Boulogne, which bordered the city. As Cobb observes, “…Paris was closed in, on almost all sides, by extensive forest and woodland…nothing in fact could have been less reassuring…The highroads were but uncertain, fragile frontiers between huge areas of primeval jungle…” Some of the only pre-Haussmanization Parisians to venture forth into this territory were, in fact, painters. Impressionists were drawn to the countryside for exactly the reasons that many Parisians stayed away – the purity of unspoiled nature and the refreshingly simple way of life. In such a context, the story of Rigault and Renoir begins to make sense.

The dramatic mid-century shift that occurred in the Parisian conception of and relationship with the countryside can be attributed to two main factors: the rise of the new leisure culture encouraged by Emperor Napoleon III and further enhanced by Haussmannization, and the increasing industrialization and resultant growth of railroads. The expanding network of railroads that spread outward from the city of Paris, initially a result of the need to transport higher volumes of industrial goods, was soon capitalized on by Parisians as a new mode of public transportation. The growth of the railways had, in a sense, “…brought the surrounding countryside much closer.” Suddenly,
traveling to the suburbs did not necessitate an arduous and potentially dangerous trek through the “uncivilized” wilderness – city-dwellers could simply step on the train within the city, and then step off again at any number of the quaint little country villages which quickly began to offer in abundance the sorts of pleasurable leisure activities demanded by wealthy Parisians. Indeed, “The real revolution in travel within France was ushered in by the development of the railways, which made a major impact on the aesthetic of the Impressionists…. Speed reduced distances, blurred appearances, and intensified pleasure. Tourism quickly flourished on the northern coast of France, and opportunities for leisure activities increased in the suburbs as a result of the creation of the system of railways radiating from Paris.”

The 1837 opening of the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris’s main, centrally-located train station, in 1837 created a hub for easy transport to the countryside for weekend excursions. One of the areas most preferred as an destination for leisure activities by the Parisians was a stretch along the banks of the Seine which included such villages as Asnieres and Argenteuil (to the northwest of Paris), Sevres and Versailles (to the southwest), and Bougival and Louveciennes (to the west). These destinations were not only the domain of the wealthy. The growth of industrialization and the resulting commercialization of railroad transport made such journeys accessible to a majority of city-dwellers; a train ticket from the Gare Saint-Lazare to Bougival cost just two sous and took little more than half an hour. Both the railroad companies and the French government recognized the economic and social benefits of the growth and accessibility of this new realm of leisure, and worked intentionally to encourage it. For their part, “The railroads, by no means passive servants, advertised heavily in Paris and the suburbs…. Cheap fares for weekends and holidays soon made clear the intimate connection of leisure with prosperity for both the railways and the villages…. Louis-Napoleon included a number of suburban festivals in the list of amusements his government subsidized.”

The impact of this increased traffic to the suburbs was enormous, wholly transforming the lifestyle and culture of the relatively small, formerly quiet country towns which suddenly became major vacation destinations. Almost overnight, the main economic foci of these villages shifted drastically, from a primarily agricultural and trading-based livelihood to an economy centered on the tourism industry. It is no exaggeration to argue that “Parisians coming out to the suburbs for holiday pleasures were a force for change. They were the clients of innumerable cafes, restaurants, dance halls, hotels, bathing and boating establishments, vacation chalets, and pleasure parks. Old buildings were converted for these purposes, and many new ones built, as former owners gave way to entrepreneurs.” Guinguettes, or “pleasure gardens,” were established up and down the banks of the Seine, near towns like Bougival and Argenteuil, taking advantage of the cheaper price of wine outside of the city limits of Paris. Catering directly to the new population of Parisian weekend visitors, these were places where one could socialize, drink, dance, watch the boats passing by on the river, and be fully immersed in the pleasures of leisure. And these enticingly quaint locations, replete with carefree men and women and set amidst the beauty of the natural world, were the perfect
source of visual inspiration for a rising generation of Impressionist painters.

The intertwining of industrialization and leisure culture, and their effects on life within both Paris and its suburbs, can be seen in Impressionist paintings of several aspects of the changing countryside. One key element for analysis is, again, that of the railroad, the spirit of which is perfectly embodied in Claude Monet’s “The Railroad Bridge at Argenteuil.” Monet’s choice of this riverside town was no accident. In many ways, Argenteuil perfectly embodied the modernization that was occurring in similar locales throughout the countryside, influenced by the rise of industry and leisure. Located just nine kilometers from Paris, Argenteuil was easily accessible via both train and boat, and as such soon became a popular weekend destination for Parisians as well as a regional center for recreational yachting.

Monet captures both of these forms of transportation in his painting. The elevated railroad tracks and the river dominate the center of the painting, one on top of the other, and the dark train and pair of crisp white sailboats are without a doubt the central focal points of the composition. Framing the scene is a peaceful mix of hues of blue and white, as both the steam caused by the motion of the train and the billowing clouds (indicating the presence of winds that propel the sailboats) become almost indistinguishable and together blend into the light blue of the summer sky.

This juxtaposition serves a purpose more significant than simply creating the scene – there is a relevant symbolic aspect to Monet’s composition, as well. As Herbert astutely notes, “The parallel harmonies of city and country, and of work and leisure, are symbolized in the smoke and the clouds, a peaceful blending of man-made and natural vapors.” In another analysis, he takes this argument yet a step further, emphasizing the implicit meaning in the relative positions of the railroad and sailboats: “By stressing that sun, wind and sailboat are all going along the axis of the river, at right angles to the bridge, Monet reinforces the symbolic confrontation of the boat, symbol of leisure, with the train. Together the boat and the railroad stand for the new Argenteuil: the modern suburb that has given up its agricultural role to the pressures of urban leisure and industry. Both boat and railroad represent the new forces that were radically altering Argenteuil, forces that disrupted traditional life in this village, creating wholesale changes in the use of the river and its shore, in land ownership and land use, in the types and numbers of local residents and in the work that they did.”

A further interesting and significant element in the composition of Monet’s work is the choice not to paint any figures sailing the boats. Clearly, there must be at least one person within each sailboat, and the inclusion of observers on the shore suggests that Monet was indeed aware of the presence of people in his scene. Yet the intentional decision to render the boats simply and plainly, as if they were floating down the river almost of their own accord, allows Monet’s work to convey the implicit tension caused by the rise of the leisure class that these boats represent. In past generations, any boats on the river here would have been primarily serving a commercial function, piloted by true “river boatmen,” whose livelihood it was to ferry goods to and from Paris in order to facilitate trade. However, with well-to-do Parisians flooding these river towns in search of relax-
ART AS A WINDOW INTO THE PAST

ation and pleasure, the way that the river was used was utterly changed. The majority of boats that dotted the waterways were now sailboats, yachts and other types of pleasure-crafts, owned and operated by wealthy city-dwellers with little nautical experience, for the simple purpose of diversion. The majority of actual commercial transportation was now carried out via train – an element also present within the scene. The sailboat shifted from the traditional realm of work to the new – and, to the villagers, fairly alien – domain of pure leisure. Thus, as Monet's boats are “embodiments not of local residents, but of well-to-do Parisians, they make us think of their absent owners, rather the way an empty chair summons up a human body. They have the appeal of anticipation, of waiting patiently for their owners who, contemplating such paintings in the city, could dream of holiday sport in the open air. The exclusion of people in [the sailboats in] these paintings aids such dreams of leisure....The paintings let us become the ideal visitor...”

For at least two Impressionists, another key site of observation was the Grenouillère, a popular “floating café” situated on an island in the Seine between the country towns of Bougival and Saint-Michel. Works by Monet and Renoir which capture this area are widely recognized as “defining works in the canon of Impressionism,” landmarks both in the development of the Impressionist style of painting and the genre of depiction of everyday life and leisure. Indeed, “At the Grenouillère, [Renoir and Monet] were in the midst of finding techniques that would convey an ostensible naturalness of vision. They had to develop new means to communicate what they sought: the effects of spontaneous vision, one that would appear to be unmediated by prior, arbitrary conventions...”

The Grenouillère region, on the banks of the Seine, near Saint-Michel and Bougival, was the ideal location for the achievement of these painterly ambitions, as it fully embodied the new type of leisure culture and Parisian relationship with the suburbs that had risen as a result of Haussmannization and industrialization of the nineteenth century. Country towns such as these were fully transformed by the influx of tourism, becoming havens for the simple pleasures of boating and repose. The popular French magazine L'Evenement Illustre called La Grenouillère “Trouville on the bank of the Seine,” as “…it proved a powerful magnet for the noisy, well-dressed crowds of Parisian pleasure seekers who responded enthusiastically to the siren call of railroad advertisements and railway company posters....The train from Gare Saint-Lazare took just half an hour, cost just twelve sous and deposited [Parisians] in a riverside paradise...”

Monet’s and Renoir’s paintings depict similar scenes, likely what a visitor would see during a typical weekend day: a group of well-dressed people, probably Parisians in the suburbs for a weekend excursion, socializing on the small “camembert” island out on the water. A few vacationers swim in the rippling waters of the Seine, whose glassy surface shines invitingly with the reflections of the verdant foliage and blue sky above, and several sailboats are moored nearby, suggesting the range of leisure activities available for the city-dwellers to enjoy over the course of their visit. The ideals of the new Parisian leisure culture could not be more clearly expressed, as the rich paintings both portray a world in which “Bathing, boating, and dining-out in the ‘country’ are among
our desires, escape from urban cares is our yearning, bright colors and sensual movement are our solace and our stimulation. These are all explanations for the fame of Renoir’s and Monet’s sketches of the Grenouillère.”

In both their depictions of life within Paris and scenes in the countryside, Impressionists such as Caillebotte, Monet, and Renoir were able to capture the rapidly modernizing culture and landscape in a way that few other artists could. Haussmannization, industrialization, railroad expansion, leisure culture, and the transformation of the suburbs were defining characteristics of French life at the end of the nineteenth century. The goal of the Impressionists was to represent a slice of that life, of their everyday experiences. Yet a new culture and new economic focus – in many ways, a new world – required a new mode of representation as well. And the Impressionist style of painting was the perfect fit. Indeed, “The technique of the impressionists, at first highly controversial, eventually was accepted as the perfect vehicle for their themes of leisure….Impressionist technique embodies an apparent spontaneity that suits the idea of life seized on the qui-vive, a lack of finish that leaves room for improvisation, a heightened color, and animated brushwork that appeal to the sensuousness of our leisure-oriented culture…”

Taken at face value, the works of these artists may seem to be little more than hazy views of pretty pastoral or city scenes, created hastily and almost without effort, using loose brushstrokes and thick daubs of paint. Easy to create and “easy on the eyes” – such paintings would seem to perfectly embody the newborn Parisian leisure culture that they depict. Yet just as the seemingly carefree new lifestyle was fraught with underlying tensions – the isolation found amidst the overwhelmingly open, social boulevard spaces; the loss of traditional rural culture and transformation of villages into tourist destinations catering to “foreign” vacationing city-dwellers – so too does the beauty of Impressionist paintings belie their deeper meanings.

The same themes of uncertainty at the swift, major changes sweeping French culture are present in the artworks’ richly symbolic details; in addition, interestingly enough, the seemingly effortless style of painting that characterizes this era in fact can only be successfully achieved through careful thought and planning. As Robert Herbert wisely concludes, “An exhibition of Impressionism is the result of hard effort, but viewers can nevertheless indulge their own sense of leisure thanks to the high culture involved, which insulates them from the reality of work. Impressionism has become the perfect expression of a culture of leisure.” The viewing of an Impressionist painting is far more than simply a richly satisfying aesthetic experience – it is a chance to gain a peek into the past, to view the world of Paris and its suburbs at the end of the nineteenth century as the Parisians themselves did, with all of the changes and tensions that made it an intriguing area of study and a fascinating time to be alive.

NOTES

10. Anthony Sutcliffe, “The Impressionists and Haussmann’s Paris” (French Cultural Studies 6, June 1995), 208.
11. See Fig. 1.
17. See front cover.
19. See page 36.


31. See Fig. 2.


39. See Figs. 3 and 4.


Figure 1: Gustave Caillebotte, “The Young Man at the Window,” 1876. Private Collection. Oil on canvas.

Figure 2: Claude Monet, “The Railroad Bridge at Argenteuil,” 1873. Private collection. Oil on Canvas.
Figure 3: Auguste Renoir, “La Grenouillère,” 1869. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Oil on canvas.

Figure 4: Claude Monet, “Bain à la Grenouillère,” 1869. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Oil on canvas.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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